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DIACONAL FORMATION WITHIN PRIESTLY FORMATION

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Abstract

As seminary formation and curriculum stand today, seminarians rarely encounter a robust theology of the diaconate grade of Holy Orders in their formation. Locating preparatory diaconal ministry within the pastoral stage of priestly formation, as articulated by the new *Ratio* (2016), marks an occasion for seminaries to develop a more intentional theological formation in and spiritual experience of diaconal identity. While seminarians live the diaconate's meaning in a parish setting, the seminary's theologians can be forming a true diaconal imagination within future priests.

As the priesthood stands today in the Latin Church, all men who are to be ordained priests must first be ordained deacons and promise celibacy within that sacramental ordination.¹ The diaconate is not superseded by a man's future ordination to priesthood but is, in fact, sublated² into priesthood. One can say then that priests and bishops always remain diaconal. The diaconal mysteries of Christ, His actions in charity toward the needy, and His proclamation of the Good news for "whoever has ears" to hear (Mt 11:15), remain dynamically present in the priest as he further extends the actions of Christ in sacrifice, reconciliation, and healing.³ That is, the deacon's share in the apostolic ministry, for which he is ordained a deacon, always remains to be exercised by priests and bishops, and specifically in a diaconal manner complementing their *sacerdotium*.

1 Canon 1031, sec. 1; Canon 1050.

2 "What sublates goes beyond what is sublated, introduces something new and distinct, yet so far from interfering with the sublated or destroying it, on the contrary needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context." See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 241. Another way of saying this might be that high authority subsumes lower authority.

3 In effect, the faculties received in the diaconate remain unchanged in the presbyterate; additional faculties are conferred at presbyteral ordination.

In *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio)*, we note that being a deacon is seen as “suitable preparation . . . in view of the priesthood.”⁴ Diaconate is seen to sacramentalize the “pastoral stage” of priestly formation wherein the deacon is “inducted into the pastoral life . . . in a spirit of service . . . in view of the priesthood.”⁵ As a grade of Holy Orders, the diaconate is presented in the *Ratio* simply as a fit “staging” ground from within which one receives priesthood. This perspective is, of course, necessarily true. However, this truth about presbyteral formation obfuscates another truth, easy to miss within presbyteral formation. What is missing is a rendering of who a deacon is and why diaconate is a fitting vocation from within which priesthood is best received and lived.

If not more fully and intentionally explored in a theological and pastoral way during seminary formation, the diaconate within priestly formation risks being diminished by the man himself. Future priests, then, will be bereft of a diaconal imagination even as it cohabits priesthood in an ontological way.⁶ As seminary formation and curriculum stand today, seminarians rarely encounter a robust theology of this grade of Holy Orders in their formation. Seminary theologians and formators are eager to “get to priesthood” in their classes and meditations. Locating *preparatory diaconal ministry* within the pastoral stage of priestly formation, as articulated by the *Ratio*, marks an occasion for seminaries to develop a more intentional theological formation in *and spiritual experience of diakonia* itself. While seminarians *live* the diaconate’s meaning in a parish setting, the seminary’s theologians can be forming a true diaconal *imagination* within

these future priests.

Below, we argue that the sacramental and ministerial identity of *being a deacon* must be engaged by seminarians as a central theological subject of study at least in terms of sacramental theology, spiritual formation, and pastoral orientation. The diaconate offers priesthood foundational ways of living ministerial self-donation and births a zeal for preaching the Gospel that ought not be lost. In order to demonstrate this need, it will be necessary to lay a contextual framework in the following considerations, beginning with ontology.

Preliminary Considerations

We do not yet understand fully the ontological relationship between the diaconate and the priesthood. Both exist as distinct grades within the unity of the one Sacrament of Holy Orders. Both receive a share in the bishop’s “fullness” of apostolic ministry, yet unequally: the priesthood constitutes the “primary” mode of co-operation with the bishop’s apostolic ministry, and includes the sacerdotal powers to confect the Holy Eucharist in the Mass and to absolve from sins in Confession and Anointing, while the diaconate constitutes “a lower level of the hierarchy” and co-operates in other, non-sacerdotal ways, in the apostolic ministry. Yet for many centuries, it was unclear whether any theological or ontological necessity existed to require a man to be ordained as a deacon prior to the priesthood. The two manners of receiving Orders, now called “*per gradum*” (each grade in order) and “*per saltum*” (skipping some grades) both validly coexisted throughout the Church’s first millennium. The current and long-standing practice of this requirement, then, which the remainder of this essay assumes, is not taken as prescriptive, causal ordering of what must or should be, but rather as a description of what is: namely, that every priest today first receives the sacramental reality of the diaconate, with

⁴ Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation—Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (Vatican City: L’Osservatore Romano, 2016), sec. 74.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ We are reminded that there is only one Sacrament of Holy Orders, in three grades, each of which is a type of new birth into the Mystery of Christ’s Risen Personhood, called ontological change.

the share in the apostolic ministry belonging to that grade, and only later, the sacramental reality and ministry of the priesthood, for which the seminarian is ultimately being prepared. The key question, then, is how best to help the seminarian understand, accept, and make use of this diaconate to serve his eventual priesthood.

Recognition of Ontological Cohabitation

Given the current practice of ordaining a man a deacon before ordaining him a priest, the Church is saying, through the public rite of diaconal ordination, "Today a man must *be* a deacon before he can *be* a priest." This requirement, because it is deeply rooted in tradition, grounded in Church law, and expressed in the liturgical sequencing of two grades of Holy Orders, ought not to be simply understood as a "stage" in pastoral formation. Fulfillment of pastoral formation does not require ontological configuration through Holy Orders. Far more than a pastoral *requirement*, the diaconate possesses a quality of *sacred service* that enriches the priesthood and orients it toward an even greater, sacerdotal share in the apostolic ministry. This new orientation is the bond with Christ's sacrificial service of love. This new bond with Christ changes the man into a living sacrament of servant Love.

The now exclusive approach of priests first entering Holy Orders by way of Diaconate means that there is an ontological cohabitation of diaconate with the sacramental reality of the priesthood, in one man. This is not a "mechanical" cohabitation, a mere mixing of "spiritual chemicals." It is, rather, a new transformation, a second birth in Holy Orders. Now, the servant love of the servant Christ has "commingled" with priestly sacrificial love of the priest Christ. As a result, in priestly ordination, Christ the Servant and Christ the Priest now constitute the *Unus Christus*, with each configuration now complementing

the other. At ordination to the presbyterate, a priest carries forth all graces from prior ontological changes: adoptive son of God (Baptism; deepened in Confirmation), deacon (Christ the Servant), and priest (Christ the High Priest). In the transition from his primary ordained identity as a deacon to a priest, the priest is a "servant-priest." Likewise, should he be ordained to the episcopacy, he would be a "servant-bishop."⁷ Note that part of what is common to all three grades of Holy Orders is the Christological and apostolic mission, "I have come not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28; see Mk10:45; Lk 22:27). Christ's mission from the Father to proclaim Good news to the captives *is* the one apostolic mission, which He shares (in the order of our receiving it) with deacons, then in a fuller way, with priests; and then in its fullness, with bishops.

Vocational and Sacramental Integrity

The diaconate, like the priesthood, is a divine calling to apostolic ministry through the Church to which a man is invited to respond. Discernment requires an objective understanding of the office and sacramental graces related to the ministry to which the candidate is called, and especially its particular qualities of self-donation and proclamation of the Gospel. With regard to the diaconate, this understanding forms the basis of an ongoing interior meditation on Christ *the sent-Servant*. Such an interior discernment is not possible without substantial theological and spiritual formation on the nature of the diaconate. Indeed, without this essential component, the call becomes obscure, obscuring with it the very God who calls.

If the diaconate is a calling foundational to the priesthood, and if the calling requires formation in the order, then a deliberate theological

⁷ His priesthood would be sublated in his episcopacy.

and spiritual formation of a candidate to the diaconate must be further developed. Not to have such a formation, distinct from priesthood, leaves the candidate bereft of a prayerful and creative mind *configured fully* to Christ's own mission. That is, we risk the malformation of the imagination. The candidate needs a full and intentional formation in the diaconate in order for him to grasp his vocation both prayerfully and ministerially.

Without substantial formation, the candidate's appropriation of the office's essence and sign value, namely Christ the Servant, may be hampered along with his personal knowledge in prayer of this same Christ the Servant. Consequently, while the candidate validly receives the diaconate *ex opere operato*, his ability to appropriate diaconal graces *ex opere operantis* both at and after ordination might be challenged. This would obviously have negative consequences for his later conformity to Christ as "servant-priest."

In light of the above assessment, it would seem necessary that diaconal formation be an integral part of priestly formation. However, for this diaconal formation to have relevance to priestly life, it not only has content proper to the diaconate itself; it also needs to be demonstrated how the diaconate relates to the priesthood. It is to this last point that we now turn.

Deacon as Intermediary

A recent and significant contribution to our knowledge of who a deacon is comes from the Australian scholar John N. Collins.⁸ Collins conducted extensive linguistic research on the *diakon-* word group, from which we derive the word "deacon," typically translated as

8 John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); John N. Collins, *Diakonia Studies: Critical Issues in Ministry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

"servant." He argued that much of the New Testament scholarship on the call of the Seven in Acts 6 misinterprets the term (*diakonein*, 6:2; *diakonia*, 6:4) to mean, "service to the poor." This misinterpretation was advanced in the nineteenth century by the Lutheran Deaconess Movement⁹ and later, in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, particularly in Hermann W. Beyer's essay, where *diakonia* was presented as "the symbol of all loving care for others."¹⁰ This understanding influenced Catholic theology before and after the Second Vatican Council.¹¹ As a result, in many cases, the deacon was seen to be "useful" in parish ministry, especially in the area of dispensing corporal works of mercy to the community, but not fundamentally complementary to the *sacerdotium* of the priesthood.

Therefore, discussion about the nature and meaning of the diaconate for the presbyterate has often lost sight of the foundational realities associated with the ministry of "service." A recovery of the fullness of the sacramental and ministerial identity of the deacon as a Christological reality may put an end to it being understood as merely "one who helps out." Some of the foundational realities that need to be included and developed theologically can be noted: The call to Holy Orders requires an ongoing, interior, and ever deepening conversion. All of these steps of conversion require that the call to holiness be reconciled with its siblings, the cultivation of a contemplative prayer life, silent prayer, discovering the interior thirst, longing and hunger for the Word of Jesus (Scripture) and the Word of God (the Resurrected and Eucharistic Lord). The relevance of these

9 It should be noted that Collins's primary theological work focused on contemporary Protestant issues about diaconal ministries. His treatment of Catholic theology of the diaconate is much more limited. His primary service is on linguistic and, so, philological methods.

10 W. H. Brandt, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1964): 85-86, 92.

11 John N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, 42.

points to priestly formation has been almost completely disassociated from seminarians' diaconal formation.

Collins concludes that, far from simply being "loving caring service," the early Church's understanding of *diakonia* was used as a "code word" for the apostolic mission to take the Word of God abroad.¹² Recall that the ministry of the Word (words of Jesus) was given to the Apostles and shared with the first deacons (Stephen and Philip, respectively).¹³ The deacons received Jesus from the Apostles and were sent out by them! The Words of Jesus (Word of God) are written in the heart before they are written on the page.¹⁴ *Diakonia* is a living reality of sacrificial Love that makes the message of Christ present in the messenger and his ministry. This is one way of expressing the unity of Holy Orders, in all three grades.

The Seven referred to in Acts 6 were Greeks called and commissioned to attend to the spiritual needs of Greek-speaking widows who, because of the language barrier, were not able to understand the Good News then preached in Aramaic. Thus, "to serve [*diakonein*] at table" (Acts 6:2) likely meant to visit the homes of the Greeks and minister to them through the proclamation of the Word and other ministerial acts, under the authority of the Twelve.¹⁵ Here, the Seven were envoys or emissaries of the Apostles acting with boldness of faith in the exercise of their ministry, and this is the sense in which Irenaeus would identify them as "protodeacons."

Though not without its critics, Collins's research was so persuasive that it influenced a significant change in Walter Bauer's third edition of the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian*

Literature.¹⁶ Of course, from a theological perspective and apart from Collins's work, none of this precludes the deacon as a minister of mercy to the poor. That, too, is part of the apostolic mission. Nonetheless, the diaconate cannot be reduced to this ministry without selectively ignoring the linguistic research and scriptural witness.¹⁷

The apostles have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ [has done so] from God. Christ therefore was sent forth by God, and the apostles by Christ. Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God. Having therefore received their orders, and being fully assured by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and established in the word of God, with full assurance of the Holy Ghost, they went forth proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. And thus preaching through countries and cities, they appointed the first-fruits [of their labors], having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should afterwards believe.¹⁸

Understood this way, the deacons mentioned in Scripture and in the Church Fathers appear as men sent forth to extend the apostolic ministry of the bishop, preaching the Good News, assisting liturgically and sacramentally, and witnessing the Church's love for the spiritually and materially poor. Shawn McKnight has summarized the biblical evidence regarding the deacon in this manner: He is an intermediary, sent by Christ in the communion of the Church, with the apostolic gifts of the Holy Spirit, to herald (*kerygein*)

16 Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, revised and edited by F. W. Danker, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 20-21.

17 "Ministry at table" may mean that these Greek speaking "deacons" were "translating" or bringing the Semitic, Aramaic apostolic message of Jesus' words to the Greek believers of Jerusalem and Palestine.

18 *St. Clement's Letter to the Corinthians*, circa 96 AD.

12 Ibid., 222-226.

13 See Acts 7 and 8.

14 See Word of God; Sacred Scripture; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sec. 113.

15 Collins, *Ancient Sources*, 230-231.

the Gospel and serve the needs of others as the direct result of being a herald of Christ. This is not, of course, truly definitive of the diaconate, since the whole of the apostolic ministry is, in the relevant sense, “intermediary,” sent by Christ to serve the Church and the world. Yet the elements of this summary are helpful and accurate as far as they go. Taken together with the two most well-established elements of the diaconate over the whole of the Church’s history, namely, that deacons are “at a lower level of the hierarchy” and are ordained “not for the sacrifice but for the ministry (of the bishop),” summarize well an understanding that the deacon shares in the Apostles’ task of being intermediaries between Christ and the people. In this way, this summary offers an understanding that complements and deepens the priesthood.¹⁹

McKnight summarizes the diaconate since the Second Vatican Council in this way: “Bishops, priests and deacons are together charged with bringing the diakonia of Christ to the poor . . . and to further develop it within the Church. . . . As the diaconate entails a sacramental character, and does not entail a participation in the *sacerdotium* of the bishop, the fundamental character of the sacrament of holy orders must be diakonia.”²⁰ This means that the unity of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and the complementarity of the three grades, in their individual essence and in their shared apostolic ministry, is part of what is willed by Christ for the Church. These features, therefore, ought to be fundamental to the preparation for the priesthood of seminarians—and, indeed, of candidates for the permanent diaconate as well. The character of diaconal ordination is that sacramental grace by which Christ enables a man share in His own Servant Mysteries. Such are known existentially by the deacon through a newly strengthened ability to offer himself in service to the Gospel.

Priest as Intermediary

In light of what McKnight has concluded, we can suggest that priesthood, though distinct from the diaconate, possesses a diaconal quality. Like the deacon, the priest is granted a share in the bishop’s apostolic ministry, or *diakonia*. Like the deacon, the priest is sent by the bishop, that is, by Christ in the communion of the Church. Like the deacon, the priest “heralds” the Good News. Of course, the priest is also quite distinct from the deacon, and most especially in his *sacerdotium*. This means that the priest (but not the deacon) is granted that particular share in the apostolic ministry (and the corresponding, empowering gifts of the Holy Spirit) to offer the sacrifice of the Mass and to absolve from sins. Further associated with this share (again, distinct from the deacon) is the possibility of being granted a portion of the bishop’s *cura animarum*, serving both sacramentally and pastorally “in persona Christi capitis,” as the bishop’s (and ultimately Christ’s) representative and vicar. Yet none of this sacerdotal ministry makes any sense, apart from the underlying diaconal qualities of episcopal delegation, and Christological mission and proclamation. It is, furthermore, worth noting that, because of the distinction of the bishop as “fullness of Order,” this diaconal quality remains fundamental to priesthood, even in the case of *per saltum* ordination.

Both priesthood and diaconate, it may therefore be stressed, mediate Christ, albeit in different ways proper to their respective orders, as deacon and priest. The priest, having been previously ordained a deacon and forever configured to Christ the Servant, is always a deacon. This means that everything he does, even as a priest, even if it is specifically sacerdotal, is also diaconal. To deny this conclusion is to deny his ontological configuration to Christ the Servant as a perduring relationship. It is, in the end, to deny something of his very being and, in the process, diminish his priestly ministry.

¹⁹ Shawn McKnight, *Understanding the Diaconate* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2018) 26-28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 263-4.

Put another way, the man is both priest and deacon at the core of his being. Thus, it follows that, in the very exercise of his priesthood, the priest is always exercising his diaconate.

Greater Unity of Holy Orders

If the above is true, then what the Church celebrates liturgically—namely, the sublation of diaconate into priesthood—is, indeed, a fitting movement within the unity and logic of Holy Orders. Since such is the case, we can encourage a fuller exposition of the initial grade of Holy Orders, diaconate, in seminary formation. Such formation could unfold in a more profound way what our Lord revealed when He said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (*diakonos*) and “to give his life [*sacerdos*] as a ransom for many” (Mk 10.45). The source of the Sacrament of Holy Orders’ mission is Christ. This means that the source of Holy Orders’ common mission is not so much the mission itself (though this is critical), but the One who sends. The sacrament’s mission is grounded in Someone. Christ drives the mission of Holy Orders; He is in deepest communion with *ordinandi*. So, in truth, “Without Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). This communion gives the mission a quality and power it cannot sustain on its own.

In this perspective, the conformation of all the ordained to the mission of Christ in the sacrament of apostolic ministry is most fundamentally a conformation to Christ the Servant of all. Each of the three grades “serves” in a distinct manner, within the overarching unity of the three-fold apostolic ministry. Yet the fundamentally “diaconal” qualities noted above must characterize all three grades together; namely, delegation (from Christ to the Apostles, thence to their successors, the bishops, and from them, to each of their two helping ranks, priests and deacons), mission (the unchanging mission of the Church established by Christ and the sending of the

Holy Spirit), and proclamation (for without authentic witness, no further ministry is even possible). This is “Christ the Servant” in the whole Sacrament of Holy Orders: sent by the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, even unto the Cross.

Integrating This Vision of Diaconate into Priestly Formation?

A seminarian’s first step in Holy Orders is designated “transitional deacon.” That nomenclature carries some unfortunate implications, which must be explicitly countered. It suggests that the diaconate is a transitional *identity* (true sociologically, not true ontologically or sacramentally). Further, it invites “transitional” deacons to relativize their fundamental diaconal identity, which, in fact, is intended to contextualize, sustain, and support the servant grace received, a grace very necessary in a priest’s fatherhood. There is, in experience, a bifurcation in the seminarian—he is receiving a graced relationship with Christ the Servant in being ordained a deacon, but the weight of his imagination is resting upon his ordination to priesthood, which (falsely) appears as a separate category. How could one fault seminarians for thinking this way? Much of their “pastoral” or “diaconal” year has now shifted to focus on practical priestly concerns, and the diaconal identity lays fallow, perhaps attended to only lightly.

It seems urgent, therefore, and quite in keeping with the emphases of the new *Ratio*, that the spiritual conformity to Christ that has been described as the “Servant Mysteries of Christ”²¹ thoroughly imbue the seminary curriculum, as preparation for both the diaconate and the priesthood. Such a plan could offer to seminarians a unifying foundation for their impending Orders, both spiritual and

21 James Keating, ed., *The Character of The Deacon: Spiritual and Pastoral Foundations* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017), 122-138.

experiential, touching on all four areas of formation. The candidate is being prepared to sacramentally mediate Christ the Servant. The *diakonia* entrusted to him as a deacon remains intact, when further *diakonia* is also entrusted to him as a priest. Both iterations of *diakonia* demand the same formation of a diaconal, Christological character, as noted above.

Should we not ask whether diaconal formation is the *foundation* of sacerdotal formation—servanthood as the core of self-offering?²² One can say diaconal grace begins the future priest's participation in the Christological mysteries of proclamation, delegation, and mission.²³ If not foundational, the current threat of a defective integration easily escalates to an established reality. Aware of the *Ratio*'s charge to better integrate the diaconate into seminary formation ("Seminarians must be *duly prepared* to work together with permanent deacons"²⁴), the theology of diaconal ministry as a delegated apostolic mission could be introduced very early on as an intellectual and spiritual cornerstone. In order for this cornerstone to be effective, any refreshed approach to formation cannot be strictly academic. Second, assigning formal pastoral work earlier on in seminary formation could provide fruitful growth in understanding and exercising diaconal leadership, especially if mentored by suitable permanent deacons.

Years of this kind of clerical formation and instruction could make a very deep impression on the future priest's interior life, his perception of ministry as servant-leadership, and his upcoming year of diaconate in the parish. But the long-term positive consequences might be even wider. The seminarian would have one or, perhaps, many brother deacons (along with their families) to support him once ordination has been celebrated. When this deacon becomes a priest,

he would be more knowledgeable about and comfortable with diaconal ministry; he would have deacon friends (perhaps also know their families) and be very comfortable with deacons assisting him in ministry as a priest.

If a seminarian is given insights into diaconal ministry, that might even engender ideas about the best use of the diaconate in his own parish once a priest. This kind of imaginative formation will help sustain and strengthen both the diaconate and the deacon-priest as they labor together to implement their parish's and diocese's vision of pastoral planning. With such formation, the future priest would be less likely to lose his foundational identity as one permanently available to the servant mysteries of Christ—the very core of his Christological identity as an ordained man. His diaconal identity would live inside him as a priest.

One of the most important and novel provisions in the *Ratio* is the explicit recognition that ordination is not conferred like an academic degree simply upon the completion of a course of study but is, rather, "the goal of a genuinely completed spiritual journey."²⁵ Indeed, the *Ratio* is clear:

The attainment of formation objectives should not necessarily be tied to the time spent in the seminary and especially not to the studies completed. That is to say, one should not arrive "automatically" at the priesthood merely by reason of having followed a series of pre-established stages in chronological order and set out beforehand, independently of the actual progress that has been achieved in overall integral maturity.²⁶

The *Ratio*, then, sets out the aims, characteristics, and benchmarks for the Propaedeutic stage, the stage of Philosophical

22 See Mark 10:42.

23 Keating, 122-138.

24 Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, sec. 119. Emphasis added.

25 Ibid., sec. 58.

26 Ibid.

Studies (or Discipleship), and the stage of Theological Studies (or Configuration), before arriving at the possibility of diaconal ordination. The stage of Theological Studies (or Configuration) is directly oriented toward the conferral of Holy Orders²⁷, and the *Ratio* strongly implies that conferral of the diaconate is itself the fruit of “a genuinely completed spiritual journey.”²⁸ Diaconal ordination is the completion of a specific formative program clearly distinct from (yet integrated within) the priestly formation, and diaconal ordination and priestly ordination are “two very different moments.”²⁹ Moreover, it is diaconal ordination that ushers the seminarian into the final stage of his priestly formation, namely, the Pastoral Stage (or Vocational Synthesis) that is notably marked by the induction into the pastoral life “in a spirit of service,”³⁰ a spirit, it is to be expected, already cultivated by the seminarian’s “deeper participation in the mystery of Christ”³¹ in preparation for diaconal ordination. Might it not be said that a seminarian’s diaconal identity serves him by mystically ushering the seminarian—through his prayer, through his imagination, and through his very configuration to the Servant Mysteries of Christ—to the altar of priestly identity (Vocational Synthesis), much as Simon of Cyrene³² ushered Jesus the Servant (deacon) of the Father to the altar of Golgotha where the Servant then enters fully into his High Priesthood? The practical point is that for seminarians fully to appropriate their own priestly identity, they will be well served by first appropriating that diaconal identity that is the goal of “a genuinely completed spiritual journey.”³³

Yet our experience with seminarians

27 Ibid., sec. 73.

28 Ibid., sec. 58.

29 Ibid., sec. 78.

30 Ibid., sec. 74.

31 Ibid., sec. 72.

32 See Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26.

33 Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, sec. 58.

shows that diaconal ordination is approached at varied levels of attention according to the interests of the professor doing the teaching. In class, and perhaps in spiritual direction and pastoral formation, the diaconal mystery, with its spiritual character, is not attended to uniformly.³⁴ Perhaps -inadvertently, in class, the diaconate is reduced to learning about the conferral of certain clerical rights and the acquisition of germane liturgical and sacramental faculties and skills. A spirit of service may in seed be conferred with the grace of diaconal ordination, but the expected configuration is not yet achieved; some seminarians may lack the “integral maturity” the *Ratio* envisions prior to advancing to the final stage of vocational synthesis. Indeed, experience shows that some seminarians even resist the suggestion that the diaconate has a distinctive character and spirituality that may serve their priestly identity.

The burden of formation here lies not with the seminarian but with the seminary formators and with the very manner in which seminary formation is conceived. The *Ratio Fundamentalis* challenges us to enhance our own understanding of what “integral maturity” and “a genuinely completed spiritual journey” for diaconal ordination might be and how it is served. These factors, at least, might be considered:

1. In the study of Holy Orders, more attention might be given to the character of Jesus’ own *diakonia*, first to the Father and, flowing from that, His *diakonia* to mankind, and how this *diakonia* relates to Jesus’ appropriation of His own priestly identity and

34 One seminary professor noted: “In Sacraments II we’ve got twenty-six class days. Two of those are for exams and one is for review. I’m giving two classes to the Anointing of the Sick, and seven (one hundred-minute) classes each to Penance, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. All seven days we spend on Holy Orders are applicable to all three major orders. So, I suppose the ‘meaning of diaconate’ gets seven hundred minutes, *but not all to itself*. It has to share space with priesthood and episcopacy.”

role.³⁵ More attention could then be given to the deacon as intermediary and “dispenser of the Mysteries of Christ” (diaconate ordination rite)³⁶ as related to, but distinct from, the priest as intermediary. More attention might, thus, be given to how the mystery of diaconate inheres in Christ such that the diaconate is not simply a transitional stage on the way to priesthood but is itself “the goal of a genuinely completed spiritual journey” and how the deacon is ordained *in persona Christi servi*³⁷ such that he sacramentally embodies in complementary fashion the priest ordained *in persona Christi capitis*. A fruit of this study would be a richer appropriation of the meaning of “service” and of “servant” that precludes their reduction to (but does not eliminate) their concrete and functional activities such as the corporal works of mercy or pastoral administration. It would be fruitful to explore the deacon’s threefold *munus* of service of the Word (as foundation), service in the Eucharist (as heart), and service of Divine Charity (as fruit) in relation to the priest’s three-fold office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing.³⁸ It would be fruitful to explore the Old Covenant-based typology of Levitical service as distinct from, but necessary to, the Aaronic priestly service.³⁹

35 A starting point might be the pregnant section “Relations of Holy Order” (sec. 46-49) found in the Congregation for Clergy’s 1998 *Directorium pro Ministerio et Vita Diaconorum Permenentium* that is itself richly grounded in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. The many Scriptural insights into Jesus’ relation with the Father (John 5, 8, 12, 13), His use of the term *diakonos*, and His parables of sending (inter alia, Luke 14) also suggest themselves.

36 Echoing Ignatius of Antioch’s description of the deacon. See *Ad Trallians* II.2.

37 International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2003), 95-96. See also Dominic Cerrato, *In the Person of Christ the Servant* (Bloomington, Ohio: St. Ephraem Press, 2014), 147, 157, 201, 205.

38 Congregation for Catholic Education/Congregation for Clergy, *Basic Norms for the Formation of Permanent Deacons* (1998), sec. 9.

39 See David Lopez, “Order of Levitical Blessing: Fruitfully Reclaiming a Patristic, Liturgical Typology of the Diaconate,” *Antiphon: A Journal for Liturgical Renewal* (Society for Catholic Liturgy) 19, no. 1 (2015): 52-78.

Finally, more attention could be given to the fundamentally ecclesial, apostolic, and clerical identity of the deacon, rather than, as has too often been the tendency, seeing the deacon as little more than a glorified layman.

2. In spiritual formation, more attention could be given to the interior, mystical, receptive, and humbly hidden dimensions of diaconal character, including how the life of prayer is fundamental to the deacon’s relation with the Father, thus grounding his identity. Time would be well spent with a study of Benedict XVI’s *Deus Caritas Est* in which he claims that it is the diaconate that orders and makes the Church’s ministry of charity more fruitful, not simply in the practical (horizontal) dimension (Part II of *Deus Caritas Est*) but firstly and necessarily, in the mystical (vertical) dimension (Part I). The charitable “spirit of service” to others would, thus, be engendered spiritually and not simply naturally.

3. In liturgical and sacramental formation, more attention might be given to the kenotic Eucharistic mystery as the source (and goal) of the deacon’s spirituality and mediation of Divine Charity in such a way that it gives rise to any practical service rather than acting as an addendum to it (or, worse, as a time-consuming detraction from it).

4. In homiletics, more attention could be given to the deacon as servant of the Word, receptive to the living and transforming character of the Word in keeping with the charge received in diaconal ordination to “receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you have become.”

5. It may serve (and enlighten) seminarians to become familiar with permanent diaconal formation and how its aims, characteristics, and benchmarks so closely parallel and overlap with the seminarians’ own formation.

6. Seminaries might well incorporate some mature and theologically and spiritually equipped deacons as formators and, at the appropriate Pastoral Stage (Vocational Synthesis), as mentors. Given that the *Ratio* also somewhat radically envisions that this latter stage “normally take place outside of the seminary building, at least for a significant period of time,”⁴⁰ it makes sense to make use both of mature priestly models and of mature diaconal models, each of whom would bring their particular wisdom to bear. Note well that nowhere does the *Ratio* presume diaconal ministry be confined solely to a parish; this would be in keeping with the reality that (permanent) deacons are not ordained solely for the parish but for diocesan ministry.

of Christ’s own *diakonia*, His being the envoy of the Father’s proclamation of love. As the diaconate matures in the Church as a permanent order and various ministries are imagined anew by deacons in dioceses and parishes, it can only help ordained ministry to flourish as a whole if seminarians are formed in a prayerful and pastoral reflection on the servant mysteries of Christ as well.

7. Finally, where practicable, it may well serve both seminarians and permanent deacon candidates to share together some elements—judiciously and prudently chosen—of liturgical, spiritual, homiletic, pastoral, and even intellectual formation. Aside from being an efficient use of resources, such shared formative experiences may foster deeper appreciation both of their shared and of their distinctive Christological character (not to mention human experience) and may lay a groundwork for their ministerial and fraternal relations in the future.

Conclusion

A commitment to deeper study and prayer around the diaconal identity of priests is to be welcomed today so that each priest fully apprehends the complete beauty of his vocation. It will also serve the Church well to have seminarians meditate upon the beauty

⁴⁰ *Gift of Seminary Formation*, sec. 74-5 even says that upon diaconal ordination, the Pastoral Stage “is the time from leaving the seminary until the subsequent priestly ordination.”